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ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that the greatest challenge for 21st century public relations practitioners will be the identification of organizational values and their reconciliation with societal values within the context of a quickly and seemingly chaotic syncretizing popular culture. This function of public relations requires considerable practitioner education and abilities to fulfill the requirements of what must be a well defined public relations role within the organization. Remarkable communication technology exists for a relatively new phenomenon that is receiving much attention in the academy, the concept of distance education. However, while professionals seeking professional development opportunities can be served well by distance education, it provides an unsatisfactory educational experience for pre-professional students, regardless of the quality of classroom instruction. Such students cannot fully participate in the enculturation process requisite to preparing professionals. (CR)

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"PUBLIC RELATIONS AND ITS EDUCATION: 21ST CENTURY CHALLENGES IN DEFINITION, ROLE AND FUNCTION"

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"PUBLIC RELATIONS AND ITS EDUCATION: 21ST CENTURY CHALLENGES IN DEFINITION, ROLE AND FUNCTION"

INTRODUCTION

Public relations education continues to mature and to refine itself, and the new Commission on Public Relations Education promises to provide curricular recommendations to prepare students for careers in the 21st Century (Kruckeberg, 1998). However, the new Commission's focus on professional education based on a foundation of liberal arts may not sufficiently address several areas of general education that will be of critical importance to post-Millennium public relations practice; nor may its curricular recommendations address the environment and the underlying pedagogical philosophy in which such education is provided. Students must have a considerable understanding of several societal concepts and phenomena to be able to practice 21st Century public relations, regardless of whether such content is specifically prescribed in the Commission recommendations or only assumed to be part of general liberal arts education. Practitioners of the future increasingly will need to understand the ramifications of *culture* in its social-scientific sense as well as culture's relationship to *values*. Goodstein et al. (1993) define (organizational) culture as a pattern of beliefs and expectations deeply held in common by members of an organization.

> These beliefs in turn give rise to values, the end state of being, that are cherished by the organization and its members. These values, in turn, give rise to situational norms ("the way we do things around here") that are evidenced in observable behavior. This normative behavior, in turn, becomes the basis for the validation of the beliefs and values from which the norms originated. (p. 60)

The authors (1993) argue that such organizational culture is a critical factor in both strategic planning and in overall organizational success (p. 69) because an organization's social system was developed or learned as a consequence of the organization's efforts over time to cope with its environment. Success in coping leads an organization's members to regard their way of doing things as the "best" way to cope with their organization's environment in the future (p. 58).

Goodstein et al. (1993) maintain that all organizational decisions are based on *values* that reflect managers' views of reality, i.e., the beliefs and norms that served senior management in their rise to power (p. 143). These values determine an organization's norms, i.e., its standards for action (p. 147). Goodstein et al. (1993) recommend a "values scan" to learn an organization's underlying values that must be considered in the strategic planning process (p. 144).

PRACTITIONERS MUST RECONCILE VALUES WITH CULTURE

However, 21st Century public relations practitioners will have a more daunting task than examining organizational culture, i.e., they must reconcile their organizations' values with the macro societal culture of the environment in which their organizations exist. And tomorrow's societal culture is difficult to predict because of the unpredictability of these changes that nevertheless promise to be dramatic. Bell (1988) argues that culture either is guarded by tradition or swings wildly through "syncretism" (p. 414), i.e., by combining different forms of belief or practice. However, he notes:

> ... (A)esthetic innovations do not "outmode" previous forms; they widen the cultural repertoire of mankind. Historically, the several realms may sometimes be joined loosely (as in the coupling of the bourgeois character, culture, and economy in the eighteenth century), but more often, as today, they are in tension with one another. (Bell, 1988, p. 414)

Bell (1988) says it is institutions that mediate our "ultimate" moral and religious commitments, which are learned in institutional contexts. These institutions, themselves, are premised on moral and religious understandings--what sociologists call "ultimate values".

> Various institutional spheres--the economy, politics, the family, etc.--embody and specify culturally transmitted ultimate values in terms of what is right and wrong, good and bad. These normative patterns not only indicate the ends and purposes of our actions but set limits to the means used, validating only those that are morally acceptable. As we have noted, institutions operate not only through informal understandings, the mores, but also through law. (p. 288)

Bell (1988) says that values are a determining factor in their own right and that a society's ethos, i.e., its moral and spiritual character, cannot be reduced to economic, material, political or other factors. Rather than reflecting economic realities, values are as often as not the critical agent in shaping those realities. Further, Himmelfarb (1994) suggests that economic and social change do not necessarily result in personal and public disarray, i.e., we might not be as constrained by material circumstances of our time as we have thought. For example, she claims a post-industrial economy does not necessarily mean a requisite postmodernist society or culture (p. 257).

Nevertheless, from all present appearances on this eve of the Millennium, the greatest challenge for 21st Century public relations practitioners will be the identification of organizational values and their reconciliation with societal values within the context of a quickly and seemingly chaotic syncretizing popular culture. It will be within the context of this reconciliation that relationship- and community-building between organizations and society can be fostered.

This function of public relations requires considerable practitioner education and abilities to fulfill the requirements of what must be a well-defined public relations role within the organization. Evidence suggests this preparation increasingly must be within a "professionalized" context, i.e., public relations must evolve to become increasingly professionalized through prescribed education programs and through ultimate fulfillment of the traditional criteria of professionalism, i.e., a literature (body of knowledge); prescribed education followed by a system of examination and certification; and a professionally adhered-to code of ethical behavior, replete with sanctions to punish those who transgress those ethics (the ultimate sanction being banishment from the professional community).

Professionalism has another requisite, i.e., the formation of a professional *community*, with which professionals identify and maintain membership, as well as a corollary professional culture that includes oftentimes implicit, but nevertheless readily identifiable, professional values.

Such professional values and culture are arguably absorbed, rather than learned, through students' continuing association not only with the professional community, but with their own pre-professional community of students.

These students begin joining this community and begin absorbing a unique professional culture when they decide on a professional major, when they pursue professional coursework within the professionally prescribed curriculum and when they engage in continuing pre-professional activities--oftentimes in concert with those already in the professional community (a recognized professional responsibility is support of education for succeeding generations of professionals).

A critically important part of professional education is the enculturation process whereby pre-professionals--through their study, their extra-curricular pre-professional activities and their other learning activities--absorb and adopt the professional values of members of their chosen professionalized occupation.

QUESTIONS OF IMPLICATIONS OF TECHNOLOGY CAST ASIDE

Bell (1988) says modernity is more than the emergence of science and the explosion of technology; rather, modernity is the aspiration to transform nature and humankind (p. 436). Nowhere is such aspiration more evident than in the proliferation and adoption of communication technology in contemporary society. Questions concerning the implications of this technology are most often cast aside by a modern society that holds this technology in awe and anxiously awaits the rapidly continuing development of this technology.

Contemporary education—including that of professional education—will meet several challenges as this technology continues to develop. Remarkable communication technology exists for a relatively new phenomenon that is receiving much attention in the academy, i.e., the concept of "distance education." Administrators in higher education see expanded--seemingly infinite--markets and greatly increased opportunities to provide a service function for their constituencies that—for state-sponsored universities—include a state's citizenry.

Coursework on the Internet, coursework on the World Wide Web and coursework via fiber optic networks are already proliferating, and expanding technology promises even more opportunities.

THREATS TO PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

Dazzling technology and tempting visions of infinite markets for students nevertheless pose inherent dangers that are going unappreciated in the frenzied attempt in American higher education to sell this education to new markets. Particular dangers exist in such education, however, that should be understood and appreciated and deliberated before "professional" education is provided through distance education:

- Perhaps the greatest danger is the assumption of massive, if not infinite, markets. Colleges and universities' mission may have become diluted and diffused, if not significantly changed, by their attempts to conquer time and space by providing distance education to distant constituencies.

  It must be duly appreciated that markets for higher education are not infinite, even among nontraditional students, and the assumption should be made that more people—regardless of station in life—will be interested in watching *Dateline* on television and maybe having a beer or a glass of wine during the evening than attending even a conveniently located class featuring a prominent professor from an institution hundreds of miles away.

  Cybermarketing means institutions of higher learning are directly competing for students with other institutions that in the past were not viable competitors. Someone on the internet in Nebraska or in a fiber optic classroom in Iowa can as well enroll in a program in California, all the while working and living in their home states. While distance education is well and good at some levels for individual students, and certainly is better in some instances than no education opportunities at all, wholesale participation in the distance education marketing frenzy can easily dilute the excellence of institutions who have provided high-quality resident student education as their primary mission.

A marketing mentality embracing distance education—while perhaps financially remunerative for some institutions—can easily present (and perhaps ultimately provide) education as a commodity, i.e., a degree as a consumer product to be purchased, rather than education as the means to *earn* a degree, particularly one having a professional focus and application. Service to (finite numbers of) nontraditional students can be part of a service mission, particularly of a state-supported university. Those who are already professionals, who are seeking professional development opportunities (perhaps without a goal of earning a degree) can be served well by distance education, as long as they:

a. Are required to maintain the same standards of academic achievement as are other students;

b. Do not look upon such education as a commodity, something that they are "purchasing" and thereof of which they can determine or heavily influence the standards;

c. Are in an environment that includes a majority of traditional full-time students.

d. Are not in an environment in which standards are compromised and when unreasonable concessions are made to these distance education students, e.g., no testing, class time used for students' group work because they cannot meet outside of the class, materials are provided without students' own searches for the materials, i.e., trips to the library, or in which any other educational standards are being compromised.

- Distance education provides an unsatisfactory educational experience for pre-professional students, regardless of the quality of classroom instruction. Professional education goals cannot be achieved in an environment that does not nurture community. A student within his own environment taking coursework via cyberspace or through other media of distance education does not learn about culture in the same way as a resident student.

> Equally importantly, such students cannot fully participate in the enculturation process requisite to preparing professionals. These students cannot fully join their chosen professional community through their education experiences within the context of a pre-professional student community, i.e., in their pre-professional activities and in their other campus-based learning activities in which they absorb and adopt the professional values of members of their chosen professional occupation.

Mowlana (1996) argues that the media will never be able to create a community, although they play an important role. Rather, a community is created when people act together (p. 93). One must argue that this holds true for professional communities as well, including the evolving profession of public relations.

Public relations educators must look with great suspicion on new communication technology to provide distance education. Perhaps our greatest challenge will be assuring an appropriate—indeed requisite--*environment* in which professional education in public relations can be best provided.

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